



Director of  
Central  
Intelligence

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MASSA

# The Soviet-Cuban Military Relationship

National Intelligence Estimate

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NIE 11/85-79

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## KEY JUDGMENTS

1. The Soviet-Cuban military relationship, which has strengthened since its inception in the early 1960s, clearly entered a new phase in 1975. The USSR embarked on a major program to upgrade Cuba's defenses and to give it the capability to conduct military operations in the Third World. Together the two countries entered into overt military intervention in Africa. For four years they have worked together with increasing confidence to promote the fortunes of Third World governments and revolutionary groups they favor.

2. The broad decision to modernize the Cuban armed forces apparently was made during 1975, probably before the Cuban involvement in Angola had become a major intervention. Some of the weapon systems delivered since 1975, however, may have been added to the modernization program as a "reward" for Cuba's actions in Angola and Ethiopia and as a result of a mutual desire to enhance Cuba's capabilities in future Third World conflicts. In any event, the weaponry supplied by the USSR since 1975 is transforming the Cuban armed forces from a home defense force into a military power with formidable capabilities relative to those of Cuba's Latin American neighbors, and enables it to sustain an active interventionist role in the Third World.

3. In general, we believe that both the Soviets and the Cubans are satisfied with the present framework of their military relationship and unlikely to seek a more formal agreement along the lines of the Warsaw Pact. The military modernization effort in Cuba is designed to provide Castro with forces sufficiently equipped and trained to cause the United States to calculate carefully the risks of any military move against him. At the same time, it affords the Cubans the opportunity to train on newer equipment that they use abroad.

## The Cuban Perspective

4. Havana sees its close military relationship with the USSR as having strongly benefited Cuba. Cuba views Moscow as the critical source of economic and military support that has been responsible for the development of an impressive Cuban military establishment. Castro is well aware that, without Soviet backing for Cuban forces in Angola

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and Ethiopia, Cuba could not have intervened there and hence gained recognition as a major military actor in the Third World. The Castro regime also perceives its action in support of Soviet objectives as a means of ensuring continued influence with the Soviet leadership.<sup>1</sup>

5. Cuba perceives few drawbacks to this relationship with the USSR. Havana has been characterized as a Soviet stooge by some members of the nonaligned movement, but its relationship with Moscow has so far not significantly detracted from Cuba's influence in the NAM. Indeed, Cuba emerged from the recent Havana NAM summit with a considerably enhanced position in the movement.

#### The Soviet Perspective

6. The Soviets have been able to accomplish two major objectives in Cuba. Cuban military forces are particularly effective additions to Moscow's capabilities to project its power and influence in the Third World.<sup>2</sup> And the USSR has been able to use Cuba for its own military purposes:

— The Soviets periodically deploy naval units in the Caribbean, visit Cuban ports and stage reconnaissance aircraft [REDACTED]

7. The presence of a Soviet ground forces brigade in Cuba was confirmed in August 1979. It has an estimated personnel strength of at least 2,600 men and perhaps as many as 3,000. The Soviets first established a ground forces unit presence in Cuba in 1962, and the brigade or a precursor appears to have been present since that time, although its size and mission may have evolved over time. We have insufficient information to determine with confidence the brigade's present missions. We think it likely, however, that it is now intended to serve as a symbol of the Soviet military commitment to Castro and to provide security for some Soviet facilities in Cuba.

8. The Soviets also maintain a military advisory mission in Cuba to provide technical assistance and advice to the Cuban military on

<sup>1</sup> For a fuller discussion of the Cuban perspective, see SNIE 85-79, *The Cuban Foreign Policy*, 21 June 1979.

<sup>2</sup> For a fuller discussion of Soviet objectives, see NIE 11-10-79, *Soviet Military Capabilities To Project Power and Influence in Distant Areas*, February 1979.

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planning and tactics. The size of this mission [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] may be in excess of 2,000 men.

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9. These military forces—[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] constitute  
virtually all the Soviet military personnel identified in Cuba and may  
number upwards of 6,000 men.

#### Outlook

10. On the basis of present projections, the fundamental underpin-  
nings of the Soviet Cuban military relationship are unlikely to change  
over the next few years. We expect to see continued growth of military  
cooperation both in Cuba and abroad.

11. *Soviet Use of Cuba.* Moscow will continue to use Cuba for a  
variety of military purposes and may gradually expand some of those  
uses, depending on the evolution of political circumstances. We believe  
the Soviets will avoid activities in Cuba that they consider likely to  
worsen relations with the United States seriously, particularly if those  
actions would confer only marginal military benefit. At the same time,  
the Soviets are likely over time to explore the ambiguous limits of  
previous US-Soviet understandings to test the political cost of further  
use of Cuban facilities.

12. We believe it likely that the Soviets will continue to improve  
facilities in Cuba for these purposes:

- Soviet naval reconnaissance aircraft will continue to stage  
occasionally from Cuban airfields, and Soviet antisubmarine  
warfare (ASW) aircraft may possibly begin to do so as well. The  
Soviets may have already improved their maintenance capabili-  
ties in Cuba to support such aircraft.

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- Cuban ports, particularly the new site at Punta Movida in  
Cienfuegos Bay, will probably be used for visits by Soviet ships,  
including conventionally powered submarines and cruise-mis-  
sile-armed surface combatants. The Soviets have frequently  
included such ships in their Caribbean deployments. In the  
future they might send larger ships on such visits to Cuba or the  
vicinity—ships such as a Kiev-class aircraft carrier or a Moskva  
helicopter ship.

13. Two other categories of Soviet submarines—nuclear-powered  
attack and diesel-powered ballistic missile submarines—raise more

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complicated issues.

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Although a 1970 understanding between Washington and Moscow prohibits Soviet nuclear submarines from calling at Cuban ports for "servicing," occasional port visits are not barred. Depending in part on their assessment of the expected US reaction, the Soviets may well include submarines of this type in future deployments to Cuba.

14. Moscow may seek to test US reactions by staging such visits in an ambiguous fashion designed ultimately to provide these submarines with operational support.

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15. *Nuclear Basing.* The Soviets no longer have an important military requirement to establish a strategic nuclear capability in Cuba, such as they attempted to do in 1962, or to base ballistic missile submarines there. We believe it highly improbable that the Soviets will attempt to base strategic weapon systems or nuclear warheads in Cuba in the future, even under the assumption that the USSR retained control of the weapons and denied them to the Cubans. The Soviets probably believe that such a move would lead to a US-Soviet confrontation.

16. *Soviet Modernization of Cuban Forces.* The logic and momentum of the Soviet weapons deliveries to Cuba over the past year or so suggest that new weapons are likely to follow. Soviet arms deliveries to Cuba since 1975 have stressed modernization, and the Soviets probably assume that the Cuban military forces can be improved in measured ways without incurring a strong US reaction.

- Short of introducing delivery systems that they acknowledge to be nuclear weapons carriers, the Soviets are unlikely to be deterred from providing modern weapons to Cuba solely because the United States might consider such actions inconsistent with the spirit of the 1962 understanding. If challenged on the basis of the understanding, the Soviets would likely reiterate their adherence to it, as they did last year in

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denying that MIG-23s were relevant to the 1962 understanding. The Soviets would probably resist any US effort to define more precisely the scope of the understanding, preferring to retain the freedom of action and flexibility provided by existing ambiguities.

- The Soviets will further improve Cuba's Air Force with additional shipments of MIG-21s and possibly MIG-23s. The delivery of MIG-25 Foxbats is less probable but cannot be ruled out. They could be regarded as a deterrent to US aerial surveillance.
- The USSR will provide Cuba with additional conventionally powered submarines and may also give Havana ASW aircraft as well as additional missile boats. These arms will gradually but not dramatically improve Cuban naval capability in the Western Hemisphere.
- We believe it even more unlikely that the Soviets would provide the Cubans with nuclear weapons than that they would introduce them into Cuba under Soviet control. Such provision of nuclear weapons to Cuba would give Havana a degree of independence and leverage vis-a-vis the USSR that would be unacceptable to Moscow and could entrap the USSR in an unwanted crisis with the United States.

17. *Intervention Abroad.* In Africa, participation in the Angolan and Ethiopian wars has been, on balance, sufficiently successful from the viewpoint of Moscow and Havana to make them more inclined to exploit new opportunities if they arise. If invited by one or more of the so-called Frontline States,<sup>3</sup> Cuba—with Soviet backup—would probably send troops to help those states defend their territory against Rhodesian or South African strikes. More direct Cuban—much less Soviet—ground combat involvement in Rhodesia is less likely.

18. However, if an appropriate opportunity should present itself in another area, the USSR and Cuba are likely to choose to intervene as long as a direct Western response was unlikely, the military and political prospects were favorable, and the action could be portrayed as a legitimate response to a beleaguered government.

19. The prospects for large-scale Soviet-Cuban military operations in the Middle East over the next few years will be limited—although not precluded—by (a) the Arabs' strong nationalism and their suspicions of Soviet intentions, (b) the Soviet-Cuban perception that the risk of adverse Western reaction, including a potential for confrontation with the United States, is greater in the Middle East than in Africa, and (c)

<sup>3</sup> Angola, Botswana, Mozambique, Tanzania, and Zambia.

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the presence of large, well-trained, well-armed indigenous forces in the area. Such factors would tend to make large-scale Cuban-Soviet intervention on the Angolan-Ethiopian model appear more costly than was the case in Africa and more uncertain of success. Nevertheless, these inhibiting factors will not restrain additional Soviet-Cuban support—indirect and on a smaller scale—for revolutionary groups in the area.

20. The Grenada coup and the ouster of Somoza in Nicaragua have heightened Cuban and Soviet interest in the eastern Caribbean and Central America and will likely spur Havana and Moscow to greater activity in the region. Cuba's ties with Jamaica raise the possibility that the government of that country might request a Cuban military presence to guarantee survival against domestic opposition or to provide protection against a third country. In Nicaragua, Cuban arms shipments and tactical guidance provided by a small number of Cuban military advisers operating out of Costa Rica played a decisive role in helping the Sandinistas oust the Somoza regime. The Cubans were careful, however, to coordinate their efforts with other governments in the region in order to minimize the risk of a US and hemispheric reaction.

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